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The Connection

Community-based Services, Advocacy
and Research for Connecticut

Committee on Housing, February 3, 2015.

Testimony of John Lawlor, Director of the homeless youth program at The Connection regarding
SB 408 - An Act Concerning Youth Homelessness.

Good afternoon chairs and members of the Housing Committee. My name is John Lawlor and I am the Director of the Homeless Youth Program at The Connection, a statewide non-profit human services agency that serves our state's homeless youth. I submit this testimony in support of SB 408, An Act Concerning Youth Homelessness.

Every day for the past several years, I've been contacted by youth that have no place to call home and I get to hear their stories. The stories they share are those of trauma, desperation, rejection, instability, and even exploitation. These are themes that no 18 year old should be grappling with at this fragile age in their lives. Sadly I'm hearing from them while they're living in hallways, in cars, on campgrounds, in questionable motels, in relationships in exchange for a roof over their head, and on the 8th different couch they've slept on in the past month.

In just the past year, our agency has had interface with over 80 different youth and young adults that are either homeless, experiencing extreme housing instability, or at-risk for becoming homeless. They are couch surfing with their friends and friends' families, moving from one living room to the next as they quickly wear out their welcomes. They are being kicked out of their foster family homes because they are no longer eligible to remain in DCF care under existing state policy. Many of the homeless young ladies I've come into contact with are involved in relationships with men for the sole purpose of having a roof over their heads. Relationships that tend to have the components of domestic violence, housing in exchange for sex, and unplanned pregnancy. One 21 year old young man I met in the fall had been living in the woods for months after running out of options of where he could stay and he was tired of constantly having to move from one friend's to the next. The only place he could find a stable address was in the woods, while he worked 2 jobs and attended college. And then there are the LGBTQ youth that we have come across. Often rejected by their families and lacking any viable supports, they are spending nights in hallways, in cars, or with strangers that are looking to exploit them.

What we are learning from these homeless youth is that existing systems meant to serve homeless persons in our state are failing to catch these youth. You won't find these youth in shelters or in the other adult systems geared towards resolving homelessness. Often, those environments are viewed as being unsafe, too restrictive, and re-traumatizing to these youth. For most housing assistance programs that are out there, these youth are either not medically compromised enough, not mentally ill enough, and not "homeless enough" to be eligible to have a consistent roof over their head. These are systems and services that are ill-equipped to handle an individual in their late teens and early twenties as they were designed more for those that are significantly older than those in this developmental age range. The law might say that one is an adult at the age of 18, but biology and neuroscience give us a much different picture.



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Without help and services tailored towards youth and young adults, research has shown us that they will end up becoming an incredible financial burden to our state. They will be tomorrow's incarcerated, they will be parenting at a young age and barely scraping by off of state financial assistance for years to come, and they will be frequenting our emergency rooms for routine medical care and a warm place to stay over the coming decades. They are the chronically homeless in training. But most importantly and why so many of us are here today, more than anything else these youth represent potential. Developmentally, they are at a period of their life where what they are thinking about, what they are doing, and the skills that they are practicing will be echoed in their habits and minds for the remainder of their lives. Despite the hardships that they may be experiencing, they remain amazingly malleable towards positive life outcomes.

Over the past several years, in close collaboration with DCF, who administers the grant that youth in our program are served through, we have been able to demonstrate exactly how impactful having youth-specific services for those experiencing housing instability can be. In providing these youth with a sense of safety, stability, choice, and support, our formerly homeless youth have shown us that they are able to drastically change the trajectory of their lives.

In their own apartments with assistance from our program, they received W2s this year instead of summons to appear in court. They have purchased groceries for themselves with money they earned at their job, instead of from electronic funds issued by the state SNAP program. They saw their primary care doctor to get a physical and a flu shot, instead of waiting hours at the ER for a fever. They went to bed at night in a bed that they own in an apartment that they rent, instead of going to bed with a stranger in exchange for a roof over their head. They attended interviews for college instead of appointments for an unplanned pregnancy. Most importantly, they practiced skills and roles that they will use and perfect over the course of their lives as they become valued and productive adults in our state of CT. Had they been left out in the cold, they would only be practicing survival skills during this key time of their development.

Ameliorating youth homelessness in our state is one of the most sound decisions, both socially and financially, that we as a state can make.

Respectfully submitted by,

John T Lawlor
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The Connection